



Guatemala

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 42,043 square miles and a population of 13.7 million. According to official census data, the indigenous population is 43 percent, although unofficial estimates are higher.

The religious demography has changed significantly over the last few decades, influenced by political and societal pressures. Historically, the country was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic; however, in part due to active proselytizing efforts, evangelical groups have flourished.

There is no official census of religious affiliation. The Episcopal Conference of Guatemala, the official ruling body of the Catholic Church, estimates that 65 percent of the population is Catholic (2008). Alianza Evangelica, the official umbrella organization for Protestants, estimates that 35 to 40 percent is Protestant. A 2006 survey conducted by Latinobarómetro indicates that Catholics comprise 56.9 percent of the population and evangelicals 30.7 percent. The largest Protestant group is the Full Gospel Church, followed by the Assembly of God, the Central American Church, and the Prince of Peace Church, as well as many independent evangelical groups. Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Seventh-day Adventists are present, as are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. Jews (approximately 2,000) and Muslims reside primarily in Guatemala City.

Catholics and Protestants are distributed throughout the country, and their adherents are found among all major ethnic groups and political parties. According to leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations and Catholic and Protestant missionaries, many indigenous Catholics and some Protestants also practice some form of indigenous spiritual ritual.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion; however, Article 37 of the Constitution recognizes explicitly the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church.

The Government observes Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter, and Christmas as national holidays. It observes the Feast of the Assumption as a local holiday in Guatemala City (the Virgin of the Assumption is the patron saint of Guatemala City).

The Government neither establishes requirements for religious recognition, nor imposes registration requirements for religious members to worship together. The Government requires religious organizations as well as nonreligious associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register as legal entities in order to conduct business such as renting or purchasing premises, entering into contracts, and enjoying tax-exempt status. The Government does not charge religious groups a registration fee.

Due to its historical presence since colonial times, the Catholic Church does not have to register as a legal entity; the Constitution recognizes it as such. Any other religious group may file a copy of its bylaws and a list of its initial membership with the Ministry of Government to receive formal recognition. The group must have at least 25 initial members, and the bylaws must reflect an intention to pursue religious objectives. Applications are rejected only if the organization does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears to be in pursuit of illegal activities, or engages in activities that appear likely to threaten the public order. There were no reports that the Government rejected any group's application during the period covered by this report; however, Protestant leaders alleged that they found the application process lengthy (lasting from 6 months to several years), and estimated that due to these bureaucratic difficulties 7,000 Protestant churches either had not applied for registration or had not completed the process.

Foreign missionaries must obtain tourist visas, which are issued for renewable periods of 3 months. After renewing their tourist visa once, they may apply for temporary residence. Specific missionary visas are neither issued nor required.

The Government does not subsidize religious groups. The Constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of this religious instruction; when provided, it tends to be programmed at the local level. During the period covered by this report, the Ministry of Education consulted with the Catholic Church and Protestant groups on the integration of general values focusing on good citizenship, although not specific religious teachings, into school curriculums.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

Although registered religious entities are legally exempt from taxes, Protestant leaders noted that local officials sometimes required their churches to pay property taxes.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The interreligious movement focused on discussion of social questions rather than interfaith discourse. For

several years, representatives of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and traditional Mayan spirituality have participated in the Interreligious Dialogue and the Foro Guatemala to discuss social and political topics.

Evangelical Protestant churches were split between a majority group, which avoided interreligious engagement with other religious traditions, and a minority group, which actively promoted an interreligious and multicultural viewpoint.

Mayan spiritual leaders continued to note widespread disagreements with evangelical Protestants, and to a lesser extent, charismatic Catholics. Protestant churches historically have been less tolerant of indigenous practices than the Catholic Church, whose approach in many areas of the country is to tolerate traditional practice not directly in conflict with Catholic dogma. During the Spanish colonial period, some Catholic churches were built on sacred Mayan sites. Mayan leaders reported that in a few areas Catholic priests forbade followers of Mayan spirituality access to these sites, although the law permits Mayan spirituality groups to conduct religious ceremonies at Mayan historical sites on government-owned property.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials, including the Ambassador, met on many occasions with leaders of major religious institutions as well as religious-based NGOs. The Embassy promoted dialogue between leaders of Mayan and ladino groups within civil society and within diverse religious communities.

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